

Late last week, a group of House colleagues and I reviewed the impacts of the BP oil spill on Gulf Coast communities and ecosystems. We walked the coastline of the marsh and scouted the inlet bays that have now become the front lines of a land war against incoming oil. As I anticipated, it was a disheartening experience.

Nearly three months since the explosion that began the leak, communities such as Grand Isle, Louisiana, where we met with local officials, shrimpers, and fishermen, are struggling to contain the damage and prevent further landfall of oil still remaining in the Gulf. This task is akin to applying a Band-Aid to a major wound. Local residents are exhausting themselves, doing all they can to save their land, way of life, and environment.

Beyond the obvious degradation of beaches and shorelines, the Gulf's fragile ecosystem lies in a precarious state. The seafood industry has completely shut down. Sea turtle deaths and the displacement of pelican populations have also been notable wildlife effects. We reviewed the protective measures in place to protect estuaries and deadened marshes surrounding one of Louisiana's largest pelican rookeries. One of the largest rookeries I viewed was the likely site of the now-famous oil-soaked pelican photo. I was also told of reddish oil covering dolphins as they surfaced near the boats.

Clearly the priority now is ensuring that the leak is stopped, cleaning up the environment, and preventing a disaster like this from happening again. As a member of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee, I am particularly interested in the seemingly cozy relationship BP and other oil companies have had with the regulatory agency overseeing their practices, the Minerals Management Service (MMS). There were clear signs that BP had problems with this particular well. Yet BP's corporate culture failed to take necessary precautions and questions remain as to whether the oversight agency was negligent.

Local residents are exasperated also with the federal government not allowing them to take emergency measures to protect their land and livelihoods. For example, the Grand Isle community is engaged in heated debate with the Army Corps of Engineers concerning a local plan to erect rock barriers to prevent further landfall of oil. While the rocks have already been obtained, and have been sitting on barges in the Mississippi River, locals continue to await approval from the Corps of Engineers and EPA, and more oil continues to approach shore. While I spoke with the fire chief and mayor of Grand Isle about their frustration with government inertia, more oil was spotted 10 miles away that may soon reach shore.

The effects from this spill will not lie within just the Gulf Coast, but will be felt nationwide for years to come. I am continuing to dialogue with my colleagues in Congress about a way to move forward that both respects the wisdom and wishes of the local community and ensures that protective measures are safe and environmentally sound.

You may see photos from our inspection at my website, <http://fortenberry.house.gov>.